

African American Occupation Changes in the 1897 and 1900 City Directories

Occupation Category (sample occupations listed)	Loss (-) or Gain (+)
Laborer Laborer, Farmer, Scavenger, Janitor	(+)
Domestic Butler, Cook, Steward, Waiter, Laundress	(-)
Railroad Worker Car Coupler, Porter	(-)
Cargo/Transport Trades Drayman, Driver, Stevedore, Teamster	(-)
Skilled Artisans/Trades Blacksmith, Brickmason, Printing trades, Watchmaker, Plumber, Stonecutter	(-)
Building Trades Builder, Carpenter, Contractor, Painter	(-)
Service Barber, Butcher, Boot and Shoemaker, Hostler, Merchant Tailor	(-)
Retail Grocer, Huckster, Provisions, Salesman	(-)
Professional Attorney, Educator, Nurse, Minister, Doctor	(+)
Foodservice Baker, Cook-shop, Restaurant, Saloon	(-)
Government Postal Worker, Health Officer, Police	(-)
Industrial Engineer, Machinist, Miller	(+)
Clerical Bookkeeper, Clerk, Manager	(-)
Maritime Boatman, Sailor, Ship Carpenter	(+)
Cotton Industry Grader, Sampler, Tier	(-)

The largest category of workers was by far that of the laborers, representing 1,524 workers. One significant change can be seen in the dramatic reduction in the number of domestic employees, down to 133 from over 1,000. The domestic worker category rivaled the laborer category in numbers in the 1897 directory but the numbers are distinctly lower in the 1900 directory. It is unclear why this number is so much lower. Most jobs classified as domestic that were listed in the directory were for cooks, a role traditionally reserved for women. However, more domestic jobs were listed in the 1900 directory than in the 1897 directory that were considered typically male roles (butler, waiter, bell boy, etc). The disparity in this category is even more vivid when traditionally female jobs are viewed across categories. The numbers of cooks, nurses, teachers, laundresses, and maids declined significantly, and the percentage of men working in domestic jobs increased slightly.¹⁵

¹⁵ It is unclear why the numbers of women working in domestic jobs declined at such a high rate. Speculation has arisen that perhaps the white employers sought to hire white female workers in their stead. A study of the city directory for white domestic laboring workers does not support that conclusion. It has also been surmised that women of all occupations were under-represented in the 1900 city directory. However, it must also be noted that a rise in commercial steam laundries coincided with the drop in the numbers of black washerwomen. There were a few small Chinese laundry operations as well. The Wilmington Steam Laundry was operating in 1897 and grew in prominence. Another laundry service, City Laundry, was founded around 1906. African American laundresses typically required a week to clean a household's laundry by hand and would pick up and deliver the laundry themselves. The City Laundry began to advertise that they could pick up by 10:00 in the morning and deliver by 4:00 in the afternoon. Such competition surely affected the client base for many laundresses. For information on the changing lives and work of laundresses, see Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*,